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# Teacher beliefs and values under the microscope

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## Abstract

This paper is an account of teacher beliefs and values that shape their responses to classroom events. Their beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning are also shaped by cultural traditions. Differences in values also account for the differences in interpreting and making sense of policy requirements. These beliefs and values are dialectical rather than unilateral, in the sense that practice does not always follow directly from beliefs. This paper addresses the question of how teacher beliefs and values influence their classroom practice and teaching decisions in the context of a country steeped in cultural traditions.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper looks closely at beliefs and values teachers uphold about policy initiatives related to language education in the context of the education system in India. While the term belief covers broad interpretations like expectations, roles and responsibilities and other aspects related to teacher beliefs, this paper explores teachers' beliefs about policy initiatives and what it means in practice for them. In order to understand how teachers approach their work it is necessary to understand the beliefs, values and principles they uphold. Implementation of policies is not a matter of teacher compliance rather the teacher should be encouraged to develop a sense of ownership and to use his/ her professional judgment within the mandate of the school. It is important to acknowledge teacher beliefs in educational practice because their beliefs have wide implications for classroom practice. The extent of policy implementation in this context was determined by the nature of the individual level responses which underscore the complexity of educational change.

## 2. Review of Literature

Despite the theoretical and methodological diversity in studies on teacher beliefs, researchers (Fullan, & Miles, 1992; Fullan, 2001; Brown, 2000; Ellis, 2003; Dong, 2004; Spaulding, Carolino, & Amen, 2004) have pointed out that the literature suggests teacher beliefs and values as having profound influence on classroom practice and teaching decisions.

Further, research has also shown that curriculum processes and tasks are carried out differently by different people owing to the different interpretations they ascribe to curriculum implementation. For example, individuals who subscribe to the rational-logical process which is an outcomes based approach believe that the events in the world are predictable and hence view the revised curriculum as a solution to the problems that exist in school. This

perspective of change process is both rational and systematic and involves top-down strategic planning. However evidence attest to the fact that this perspective on change is ineffective (Fullan, 2001).

Long ago, Breen (1991) makes two useful proposals for research on beliefs about language learning and teaching. First, he suggests that investigators ask teachers to evaluate their beliefs on the basis of “actual classroom events”, Second, he proposes that curriculum change can be brought about through teacher reflection, particularly, by encouraging teachers to make connections between classroom action and personal theory. This is based on the argument that the planning of a lesson is a complex problem-solving task, involving thinking about the subject matter, the students, the classroom, and the curriculum, during which teachers transforms and modifies as aspect of the curriculum to fit the unique circumstances of his or her class. Different teachers have different beliefs and values which they bring into the lessons and the actual lesson translated in the classroom is an interplay of different factors that differs from one teacher to another.

It was also found that the realities of the classroom and its context are the reasons for the discrepancy between the policymakers’ intentions and teachers’ execution of the policy. To examine how policy and classroom practice interact Skuja-Steele (2005) compared classroom practices and teachers’ statements of pedagogical rationales with governmental policies. They found that teachers were aware of policy initiatives related to language education. However teachers placed their emphasis on student learning, focusing on immediate classroom priorities that influenced daily lessons. The changes were mitigated by the local contextual factors.

### **3. Methodology**

Fifteen teachers from three schools in Madurai district, India were interviewed to glean their responses on the changes in the English language policies. Face-to-face interviews provide opportunities to gain in-depth information about beliefs related to English language policy changes and the values that shaped these teachers’ classroom practices. Apart from interviews document analysis and classroom observations were used to understand the participants’ motives for action. The documents, mainly the policy and curriculum documents provided a stimulus for generating questions that were pursued through classroom observations and interviews.

The research question that guided this study was - How do teachers’ beliefs and values about the curriculum influence their classroom practice and teaching decisions?

Analysis of data was through constant comparative method and development of themes.

### **4. Findings**

In a traditional Indian classroom where the teacher dominates the class the new education policy advocating learner-centered activities in the curriculum call for a drastic change to teachers’ roles in the classroom. The change in the curriculum objectives implied the need for change in classroom practices.

The following themes emerged after data from several sources were analysed and triangulated.

#### *2.1 Confusion over instructional strategies to be adopted*

Prior to the implementation of the ABL (Activity Based Learning) policy, between 1990-2003 the students followed the conventional grading system and students proceeded from standard 1 to the next grade whereby the students in one class all followed the same syllabus. The current ABL system adopted in 2003 is a major departure from the conventional classroom. Under the new system the students are placed in an inter-graded structure whereby students from standard 1 to standard 4 are placed in the same classroom but each group of students followed their

own syllabus as per the ladder chart indicated. The new system emphasized child-centered activities and the activity cards replaced the use of text-books. With the change in objectives in the policy documents, teachers' instructional strategies had to change from the traditional chalk-and-talk method to that of being a facilitator. Many of the teachers were confused with the terms 'learner-centered' and 'joyful-learning'. Teachers in each school had differing opinions on these two terms and the common consensus among the teachers were that if the students enjoyed their class or were engaged in their tasks then it constituted 'joyful learning'.

As teacher Annam says,

*"In my opinion as long as I see that they are doing their work then it is considered learner-centered. I often use teacher-centered approach because these students achieve nothing without teacher's interventions".*

Her views are corroborated by teacher Roselyn who opines,

*"Irrespective of the objectives I make sure they learn something in my class. I don't think the concept of joyful learning matters the most".*

With no clear guidelines in the policy on what is to be achieved by the teachers there were contradictions between the expectations between the policy makers and the practices by the individual teachers. When there was a conflict between teachers' beliefs and what was expected from them the teachers practiced as per their beliefs. Classroom observations as well as interviews with teachers revealed that they resorted to the drilling method and choral recitation repeatedly. Teachers viewed direct transmission as the 'correct method' which was also received well by the parents as well as students.

According to teacher Roselyn,

*"I do not believe so much on focusing on the communicative aspects of language teaching. Most of the time this is how we were taught English and I follow the same concept with my students. I think choral recitation work fine with my students. They like to sing rhymes in chorus and they like this activity".*

The teachers expressed that the goals they set for their students varied according to the students' socio-economic background. Each teacher viewed her practice as the best as she had to adapt to her own context. This in itself highlights the challenges of defining good practice which again underscores the complexity of change.

## **2.2 Social conditions impacting classroom practice**

The classroom conditions were found to be far from conducive for teaching. Teachers opined that they were not trained to teach multi-grade classes.

This is best reflected in teacher Mary's opinion who says,

*"textbook system is good in terms of achieving the outcomes. With the new system it is difficult for us to set an objective and to follow-up. Our one day training does not equip us to teach multi-grade classes".*

Mutual learning and peer learning advocated in the policy documents did not take place in the classrooms. Teachers believed that young learners are not ready to be independent learners and the Indian context calls for the 'presence' of the teacher throughout the lesson.

Teacher Niranjana recalls her lessons,

*“students keep coming to us for clarifications and with each group following their own syllabus I am not sure which group should receive guidance. All students want my attention. The text book is more structured and I can pace my lessons. Parents also view this negatively and I believe it is not suitable in an Indian context”.*

The gaps in instructional time between schools within the same district meant the students’ exposure to English language varied from one school to another. Under this circumstance the changes expected to take place by the policy makers were marginal.

Although some teachers changed their negative perceptions and acknowledged the merits in the policy changes, these teachers also viewed the merits as marginal and opined that small successes were celebrated as achievements.

As teacher Mary says,

*“When students are able to speak few sentences it is lauded as a great achievement. Actually when compared to a private school students these children are way below the standard. There should be something more concrete to measure success only then can we judge where we stand in terms of achievement”.*

The literature on school change also focuses on the importance of learning and views change as proceeding over time, requiring constant problem solving, ongoing attention, and collaboration. (Fullan, 2003; Hoban, 2002; Pieri & Diamantini, 2010; Savi, 2010; Hussein, 2010).

### 2.3 Conflicting Goals

Different teachers had different beliefs and values which they bring into the lessons and the actual lesson translated in the classroom is an interplay of different factors that differs from one teacher to another. The realities of the classroom and the context are the reasons for the discrepancy between the policymakers’ intentions and teachers’ execution of the policy. Multi-grade teaching was viewed negatively by almost all the teachers and their perceptions of multi-grade classrooms were associated with noisy classroom, and lack of time to implement communicative activities in the classroom.

Teacher Annam shares her views thus,

*“multi-grade classrooms are noisy and with limited time it is difficult to monitor all the groups. We still have administrative work to handle and there is no time to implement meaningful activities in the class”.*

The changes were mitigated by the local contextual factors. The child-centered Montessori system was not in tandem with teacher beliefs. Teachers had the culture of conforming to group tendency and adopt the senior teachers’ views on the activities to be conducted in the classes. Most of the teachers as well as the parents believed that the existing system of assessment challenged their long held beliefs on examinations and that it was not comprehensive and with no formal exams students’ attitude towards learning changed.

According to teacher Kanaga,

*“under the new system each child’s progression is so different and parents do not understand the new system. Since there are no formal exams students learn at their own pace with no time lines to complete the syllabus. They can still go to the next level irrespective of their standard. Most of the teachers and the parents believe exams should be conducted and students should be graded accordingly”*

The stakeholders’ assumptions about how the teachers should carry out their work ignored the personality and the individual beliefs and values of the teachers.

### 2.4 Skepticism

Teachers were skeptical of the change and were not interested to take up further training. Implementation of a successful change also depend on how teachers feel or think and their values and beliefs

Says teacher Annam,

*"Time is our premium we do not want to learn something only to revert back after few years. Moreover I believe this system is not so good in the long run".*

The beliefs and the values of the teachers manifested in their teaching practices. Most of the teachers opined that the communicative teaching tends to focus on the communicative aspects and neglected teaching grammar.

.As teacher Sharada reflects,

*"those days teachers focused a lot on grammar. Now most of them focus on communicative teaching and neglect grammar which is the foundation".*

They preferred the grammar-translation method which they said stressed on accuracy. Though they adhered to the curriculum they conducted their classes according to the way they have been taught. They saw no urgency to change the teaching approach.

As majority of the teachers opined, 'we will wait and see'. As teacher Sharada says,

*"this idea was based on the initial success in the Rishi Valley school and just because it was successful there it was quickly adopted in other schools. Our schools lack resources and teachers are not trained well to handle this. Therefore most of the teachers are not willing to change their teaching approach".*

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Teaching is "a highly situated and highly interpretive activity that requires teachers to figure out what to do about a particular topic, with a particular group of students, in a particular time and place." (Johnson, 2002, p.1). What transpires in the classrooms is a reflection of teachers' personal views about themselves, their learners, and their role in the classroom. Teacher beliefs and values have a significant impact in their classroom practice and teaching decisions. These beliefs sometimes constitute the hidden pedagogy in the classroom.. The curriculum is grounded in personally evolved theories or sets of beliefs about teaching and learning. This study shows that these practitioners tend to make decisions about classroom materials, methodology and resources on implicit theories about the nature of language and learning. In sum, as participants of change teachers' teaching style, pedagogical assumptions and their values and beliefs need to be acknowledged in any change innovation.

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